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ABSTRACT

Educators in intentionally small schools in Chicago are working to create a climate that is inviting, engaging, and challenging to some of the most academically disadvantaged students. Over a period of 18 months, data were collected from eight intentionally small schools that included elementary, middle, and high schools; freestanding schools; schools within schools; schools on probation; and schools that predominately enrolled poor and working-class African American and Latino students. Findings from 76 interviews with administrators and staff, 36 focus groups with staff and students, and 137 observations in schools highlighted the importance of professional community, collegial trust, and collaborative work in creating a schoolwide climate for effective education. Factors that contributed to this were philosophical coherence among faculty, a sense of collective responsibility for student welfare, public accountability, shared leadership, teacher collaboration, and a balance between academic concerns and student care. Participation in strong professional communities enabled these practitioners to create engaging and challenging learning experiences for students, who under other circumstances, might have been ignored, poorly educated, or left behind. Instead of relying on the student deficit model to excuse poor teaching and learning, they looked to themselves and their colleagues to improve the process. Some concerns that were identified included teacher burnout, staff fragility, and unfamiliarity with consensus decision making. Teachers in schools within schools often found it difficult to divide their time between their small school and host school. Data from a systemwide study of small high schools suggest some ways that strong professional communities promote student achievement and other positive student outcomes. (Contains 22 references) (TD)

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SMALL SCHOOLS MAKING BIG CHANGES: THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOL REFORM

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Small Schools Making Big Changes: The Importance of Professional Communities in School Reform[9]

Introduction

U.S. Department of Education statistics reveal that during the 1999-2000 academic year approximately 30% of all public elementary and secondary schools enrolled between 750 and 1500 students, and another 14% of these schools enrolled more than 1500 students. In some of the larger districts, there are still schools in the 2,000 to 5,000 student range (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Due to issues such as disorder and violence, poor attendance, and low academic performance, there has been an increased concern at the federal, state, and district levels as to the influence that school size has on teaching and learning. Further, conversations regarding school reform have been increasingly focused on the effects that school size has on some of the most academically disadvantaged youth – particularly African American

[9] This paper extracts findings from a 28-month study commissioned by the Joyce Foundation to the Bank Street College of Education in collaboration with the Consortium on Chicago School Research to investigate *how small schools contribute to the renewal and effectiveness of one large, urban school district.* The overarching project took a comprehensive look at small schools, and is documented in the final report, *Small Schools: Great Strides* which is available on Bank Street's web site.

and Latino students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Fine, 1994; Lee and Smith, 1997; Wasley, 2000).

School size is frequently mentioned in the effective school, school development, and school reform literatures (e.g., Newmann and Welhage, 1995; Oxley, 1995; Sebring et al., 1995). Most would agree that size, in and of itself, is not a successful strategy for school improvement; however, smaller schools often provide the opportunity to develop the critical elements of productive schools (Bryk et al, forthcoming; Powell, 1996; Sebring et al., 1995). In an extensive literature review Gladden (1998) revealed that in comparison to students who attended large schools, students labeled "at-risk' who attended small schools were more likely to have positive academic experiences in terms of: fewer course failures, greater accumulation of course credits, higher standardized test scores, and higher levels of educational attainment.

This paper sets out to demonstrate how intentionally small schools can help to create a climate that is inviting, engaging, and challenging to some of the most academically disadvantaged students. Using empirical evidence regarding school size, this presentation will address some changes that faculty members in

one large, urban school district are making in order to improve the teaching and learning environments for themselves and their students.

Background

There is a body of research that indicates the potential and power of intentionally small schools. Some of the major findings suggest that these schools: reduce student dropout rates (Fowler and Walberg, 1991; Franklin and Crone, 1992; Wasley et al., 2000), reduce student violence and disorder (US Department of Education, 1998; Zane, 1994), increase student attendance (Fine, 1994; Wasley et al., 2000), increase students' attachment to and satisfaction with school (Lee and Smith, 1997; Oxley,1995; Wasley et al., 2000), close race/class achievement gaps (Howley and Bickel, 2000; Lee and Smith, 1995, 1997), and improve professional climate (Oxley, 1995; Wasley et al., 2000). And while the improvement of professional climate is a consistent finding, relative to other findings, it has received very little attention (Cotton, 1996). However, in light of the influence that strong professional communities have on student achievement (Newmann and Wehlage,1995), it is important to understand the conditions

that create, support, and sustain practitioners, both individually and collectively, as they educate our nation's children.

In a theory of essential supports and contextual resources for school improvement, researchers have developed a comprehensive model of interdependent components that are critical in school reform and improved student learning (Bryk et al., forthcoming). The components of this model often work in an interrelated fashion wherein improvement in one support often indicates improvement in other parts of the model which, when all taken together, should result in greater student engagement and achievement. One of the key organizational characteristics of this model is *"leadership and governance."* According to the essential supports framework, effective school leaders share responsibilities, encourage collaborative work, and include members of the school community in policy decisions. Similarly, the theory of distributed school leadership suggests that leadership activities are shared among formal and informal leaders, that they include and empower individuals, and they have the potential to yield results that are greater than the contributions of each individual (Spillane et al., 2001).

Another one of the major supports in this framework is *"professional capacity"* which highlights the importance of professional community, collegial trust, and collaborative work. According to the model, teachers who work collaboratively with their colleagues and share responsibility for the well-being of students create a school wide climate for effective education. Practitioners who pool their resources to create a concrete vision for the school, using collaborative efforts to increase student learning, often think of their schools as teaching and learning communities.

It has been suggested that when schools are thought of as communities, as is often the case in intentionally small schools, the development of supportive and collegial professional relationships among the practitioners is an important goal (Sergiovanni,1993). In a study that considered high schools as communities, Bryk and Driscoll (1988) report that teachers in small schools reveal: the teaching environment is communal; the teachers enjoy their work, and there is high staff morale. These researchers also report that the students in small schools perceive that their teachers enjoy their work. In research about school improvement in elementary schools, Sebring et al. (1995) found that teachers in small schools

responded positively on measures related to their work and collegial relationships, and that small schools with these types of professional communities were strongly represented in the top thirty improving schools. More recent research indicated that in comparison to their colleagues in conventional schools, high school teachers in small schools are more inclined to report a stronger professional community as indicated by measures of teacher satisfaction, collaboration, continuity, professional development, and heightened commitment to student learning (Wasley et al., 2000). And while improving professional communities is an important goal in and of itself, an equally important motivation is that strong professional communities have been found to positively affect student achievement (Newmann and Wehlage,1995).

Methodology

The research team employed a multi-methodological approach, including quantitative and qualitative data collection, to investigate the presence and contributions of small schools in this district. The quantitative analyses allowed us to statistically compare small schools to the overall school system, and the

qualitative analyses helped us to determine the conditions within and around small schools by which they sought to become educationally effective and equitable. For the purposes of this paper, the data will generally stem from the qualitative data.

The purpose of the current study was to identify schools that were made small by choice and were using size as a whole-school method to create, develop, and/or improve the teaching and learning environment[10]; therefore, schools were required to meet certain criteria to be included in this research. The first requirement was that these schools came into existence in response to the reform efforts of the district which also meant that they were largely serving low achieving, poor, African American and Latino youth. The second requirement was that the schools in the sample adhered to district's 1995 public resolution regarding small schools. According to that resolution, small schools were "characterized by (1) a small number of students, usually no more than 100-350 in elementary schools and 500 in secondary schools; (2) a cohesive, self-selected faculty supported by like-minded

[2] We did not include large buildings with declining enrollments due to high levels of violence or low academic performance, nor did we include specific programs within a building (e.g., literacy program) that only served a select number of students or grades. Although the student enrollment criteria may be met in these types of conditions, there are several key features of the intentionally small school that are absent.

parents; (3) substantial autonomy as to curriculum, budget, organization, personnel and other matters; (4) a coherent curriculum or pedagogical focus that provides a continuous educational experience across a range of grades; and (5) an inclusive admissions policy that gives weight to student and parent commitment to the school mission."

In order to identify the schools from which qualitative data were collected, the research team engaged in a two-stage process. First, key participants who represented a variety of reform groups and educational institutions were interviewed. The interviewees were asked to identify small schools that met the research criteria and had an interesting programmatic focus, organizational structure, and/or history. Twenty-five schools located throughout the city were identified. The second stage involved arranging site visits and gathering information on the schools' student enrollment, mission, staffing, partnerships, and academic performance. Members of the research team visited 22 of the 25 schools[11].

[3] Three schools were not visited because they were either closing the following year or the research staff was unable to gain access to the schools.

Selection Process

When this study began a comprehensive list of small schools and their academic performance did not exist. In order to identify the schools from which the ethnographic sample was chosen, the research team engaged in a two-stage process. First, key participants in Chicago's small school movement who represent a variety of reform groups such as the Small Schools Workshop, Leadership for Quality Education (LQE), Business and Professional People for Public Interest (BPI), the Small Schools Coalition, the Quest Center, and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) were interviewed. The interviewees were asked to identify small schools that had interesting programmatic focus, organizational structure, or history. Twenty-five schools located throughout the city of Chicago were identified. The second stage involved arranging site visits and gathering information on the schools' student bodies, missions, staffing, partnerships, and academic performance. Members of the research team visited 22 of the 25 schools. Three schools were not visited because they were either closing the following year or the research staff was unable to gain access to the schools. Synthesizing information from the interviews and site visits, the research team used a number of

factors, which would yield a broad representation of small schools in the city. A variety of factors were considered when selecting the schools such as whether the schools received funds from the school Board for start-up costs (RFP vs. non-RFP schools), origin of school (by teachers, principals, university, community groups, etc.); location; external partnership; racial/ethnic composition of students; grade levels and type of school (e.g., freestanding, school-within-school, etc.).

Sample

A range of eight small schools were included in the qualitative sample, such as: elementary, middle, and high schools; freestanding schools and schools-within-schools[12]; schools on probation[13]; schools that are geographically distributed across the city; and schools that predominately enroll poor and working class

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[4] *Freestanding small* schools have their own space, budget and principal. Some of these schools are housed in a *multiplex* where they share a building and principal, but have their own unit numbers and act independently from the other schools in the building. For the purposes of this study, multiplex schools are treated as freestanding schools. The *school-within-school (SWS)* is where the small school is located within a larger school — the latter is often referred to as the *host school*. Most SWSs that have their own mission and curricular focus, but do not operate independently from the larger school and remain subject to the budget and overall leadership of the building. And lastly, there are *multischools* where the entire building is reconfigured into several smaller learning communities. Unlike multiplex schools, multischools do not operate completely independent of the other schools in the building.

[5] Probation schools are those with fewer than 15% of the students reading at/above national norms on the standardized test administered by the district.

African American and Latino students. In addition to meeting the abovementioned criteria, schools that were included in the qualitative sample had to: 1) be intentionally small[14]; 2) have a vision; 3) have contiguous space; 4) have a stable teaching staff; and 5) have students who attended the school over multiple years[15]. Based on some other characteristics such as advanced planning, experienced lead teachers and administrators, the presence of strong external partners, and a clearly articulated plan for the link between size and student achievement, these schools suggested that they would last the duration of the study.

Over a period of approximately 18 months, the following ethnographic data were collected from the eight schools in the qualitative sample: 76 interviews (from principals, directors, lead teachers, teachers, and external partners); 36 focus groups (with

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[6] It is important to note that the majority of the schools in the quantitative sample, and all of the schools in the qualitative sample, where small by choice. School size was considered a key feature in transforming the experiences for teachers and students. In many instances the faculty was self-selected and committed to small school size as a reform strategy. Further, while all of the schools in this sample were public schools with open admissions policies, it is possible that the students and their families who chose small schools were among those seeking more challenging and fulfilling educational experiences. Thus, we acknowledge on the onset that the small school communities in this sample may include many motivated individuals, both on the faculty and in the student body. And while there may be questions about the degree of causality, it does not negate the lessons that can be learned from these data about small school size as a method of reform.

[7] See Gladden(2000) for a detailed rationale of the additional criteria.

staff and students); and 137 observations (from classrooms, staff meetings, professional development meetings/activities, the Local School Council, etc.). Data were analyzed based on major categories that are associated with the essential supports and contextual resources for school improvement (see Bryk et al., forthcoming). Further, following a grounded theory approach, themes that emerged from the data collection process were also categorized and analyzed.

The Small School As A Professional Workplace

> "The smallness has created a sense of camaraderie and commitment that you would not find in a big school." Small School Principal

The findings from this study indicate that the faculty members in these small schools rely upon key themes to help develop themselves, their students, and their schools. While none of these strategies are unique, it is the very thoughtful and systematic way that these themes were applied that helped to create a whole-school climate with noteworthy improvements in teaching and learning. Teachers no longer worked in isolation or blamed students for their inability to learn. As these data will reveal, the changes that were made by the faculties in these intentionally small

schools helped to reinvent and revitalize their practice, and they used their collective efforts to engage students and positively influence academic achievement.

Philosophical Coherence

The members of the faculty in this sample had a collective understanding of, and support for, the mission, vision, and goals of the school. This included understanding the need for reform efforts in order to raise students' academic achievement; acknowledging school size as a facilitating factor in teaching and learning; and supporting features that were put in place to help advance the school's mission as reflected in a curricular focus, pedagogical practice, or vocational theme. Faculty members indicated that the school mission and vision were often used to attract and recruit like-minded educators to join the staff. The goal of having a like-minded staff that supported the principles of the school often resulted in a cohesive faculty with a strong commitment to the school.

> "Think strongly about hiring to make sure you have all people who subscribe to the vision of the small school." (Staff Focus Group, School F)
>
> "Make sure everyone is on the same page in terms of philosophy before getting into something like this. You need to really create a vision and stay

clear of that at all times..." (Lead Teacher, School D)

"First and foremost, you have to have a curricular focus. You have to decide what approach you're going to have... I've seen a lot of people come together and say, 'let's open a school', but, I feel a curricular focus is absolutely essentially" (Lead Teacher 2, School A)

Our data suggest that in small schools where staff members are frequently in close physical proximity with each other, there is a greater opportunity for keeping the mission alive. While staff selection and alignment with the school philosophy are important in any sized school, these faculty members all suggested that because of the size of their schools they were able to closely monitor the methods by which the members of the staff responded to, and implemented, the school mission and vision. While in the positive instances this helped to produce faculty cohesion, there were incidents where insufficient support resulted in staff members leaving the school.

"We happen to have a really cohesive group...some people say it's because we were self-chosen, you know, and some people say it's because...we're kind of all on the same page, we have the same philosophy, but there are a host of reasons why people who work together work well together and, for some reason, we do." (Teacher, School C)

"Select teachers who are moving in your direction... Selection of teachers is critical. If you have a

> curricular focus, somebody has got to understand the focus completely....somebody has got to understand it so you can teach it to the rest of the people... and there has to be an understanding that if things don't work out, then they'll have to move on." (Lead Teacher 2, School A)

Intentionally small schools with strong, cohesive faculties often allow stakeholders (both within and outside of the school) to collectively think about and further develop the mission for their school with a feasible vision to have it implemented. Administrators and faculty members in this sample suggested that developing a mission for a school that they helped to create, for students whom they knew, was substantially different than adopting an existing mission or thinking about a method to make the mission come alive for numbers of nameless or faceless students. It seems that schools of this size allow the stakeholders to see how, if at all, the students are responding to and benefiting from the mission, as well as determining if the mission needs to be adjusted in any way. Some schools used their level of solidarity around the mission as measure of the staff's growth.

> "...when we were doing interviewing for the next year's crop [of teachers],...the staff being able to sit around the table and explain what the school was about with an incredible philosophical coherence. It was amazing. And that sort of let us know that they had hit another level." (External Partner, School A)

Collective Responsibility

The shared commitment of the faculty for the welfare of the students' was evident in their words and actions. Observations revealed occasions where staff members went around the room, called each student by name, and assigned the student to a faculty member for advisories. In another school, staff meetings included occasions for teachers to present academic and non-academic issues about specific students, consider action plans, and decide which members of the staff would be present for the staff-student-parent discussion. And on a daily basis teachers discussed curriculum, academic practices, and school policies. The ethnographic data revealed that, individually and collectively, the faculty members in these schools were very committed to the academic and social development of the students.

> "We're not all best friends, but there is a link. That link is the kids." (Staff Focus Group, School E)
>
> "For three years [our students] know the teachers they are working with. There's no down time where you have to go over the rules again, get to know the kids. When it comes to subject areas, we know what we've covered, we know what we need to cover." (Staff Focus Group, School G)
>
> "...[we're]...a community of learners both teachers and students...A place where everybody works together...that school is a major priority for students and...teachers are of the same mind set in terms of

> what they are trying to accomplish with the kids, not only in the classroom, but before and after, the real world...more communication between everybody students and students, students and teachers, teachers, parents and teachers." (Lead Teacher, School B)

Globally, there is an implied understanding that parents will be partners in their children's education; however, in these schools there were often explicit contracts and arrangements made to insure that parents and faculty members were conveying consistent messages about the students' education. Arrangements were made above and beyond the standard parent-teacher conferences and report card pick-up dates. For instance, several schools in this sample asked the parents and students to sign contracts outlining their responsibilities to the students' education. Some of these indicated that the students agreed to do their homework every night, and the parents agreed to assist with, review, and sign the homework. Other schools asked that, when able, parents donate a certain number of hours during the academic year as school aides or field trip chaperones. And other schools requested that parents make time to discuss students on a regular basis, even if these conversations had to take place outside of the

regularly scheduled school day to accommodate parents' other commitments.

By actively sharing the responsibility of students' education with the parents, two major goals were accomplished. First, parents were always informed about the progress of their children and could be partners in the students' school related academic and social development. Another major goal was that students were not receiving contradictory messages about their education from the adults in their lives. Teachers and school leaders suggested that some relationships were difficult to initiate; however, when employed, these types of arrangements worked well because parents were able to talk to the same faculty members over time.

> "There is no way you can make this school what it is without the support of parents and community." (Lead Teacher 1, School E)
>
> "There's a distinct and real connection with parents, simply because they have the same kids for three years. They get to know the parents, and can get the parents out to things that are going on. As you know, once they get to high school, it's difficult to get the parents involved. And I think the small schools are able to do that very well." (Principal, School D)

The feeling of collective responsibility was so pervasive in these schools that it was also passed on to the students.

Observations, interviews and focus groups revealed that staff members encourage students to assist and support one another in situations such as cooperative learning circles and group projects. Faculty members suggested that one of the key reasons that the students are able to assist and even accept constructive criticism from one another is because students come to know their peers across classes and grades and they develop such close relationships that they feel responsible for one another.

> "[The students] don't let special needs kids slack, but they also know you don't do the work for them. It's really a group effort and they let them know, you know, such-and-such, you're not doing what you need to do and you can do this…" (Staff Focus Group, School A)
>
> "Previously kids were grouped according to grade level, and now they [are grouped by] discipline across the grade levels, and bigger kids work with smaller kids." (Staff Focus Group, School B)
>
> "The children nurture each other. We've got the older children working with the younger children." (Lead Teacher, School G)

Public Accountability

In a small school one's actions and inactions often affect other members of the school community. Data revealed that faculty members were interested in sharing ideas with their colleagues about lesson plans, instructional practices, and the methods by which they handled student issues. These types of schools fostered

environments where teaching did not occur by individuals behind closed doors, but was the result of the collective efforts of a school wide staff. Practitioners in this sample frequently reported formal and informal opportunities where staff members exchanged ideas and constructive criticism about teaching practices, curriculum, and school policies. And while this may have been difficult for some, staff members generally looked at this as a reflective process that would help develop and advance the school and the members of the school community.

> "...the smallness and intimacy by which we can deal with problems and successes because of the ability to mobilize to solve problems. We have willingness to listen and hear critiques of ourselves..." (Principal, School F)
>
> "Just like you can see the problems more easily in a small school, you can also see the growth." (Lead Teacher 1, School E)
>
> "[The students] know we are in a continuous circle. We're only as strong as our weakest link. That's important in the black community. We are held accountable to each other." (Staff Focus Group, School H)

Cooperative Work

When asked, practitioners could identify faculty members with specific titles and designated roles (such as school leaders or literacy specialist); however, observations revealed that faculty members often share administrative and teaching duties. The

creation of the intentionally small schools appears to challenge the formal, linear, bureaucratic processes that often prohibits communal organization. In these small schools cooperative work was often demonstrated in two distinct forms: shared leadership and teacher collaboration.

School visits revealed that many teachers in these schools believe that there is a democratic atmosphere in their small schools and that they have a "voice" in school wide decisions such as determining the school mission, reviewing instructional practices, making curricula choices, and deciding upon student disciplinary actions. Ethnographic evidence suggests that within small schools there are less likely to be bureaucratic obstructions that impede dialogues between school leaders and teachers.

> "If a teacher has a curriculum idea, brings it to [one of the lead teachers], explains how it fits with the school's mission, and if it does, go ahead." (Lead Teacher 1, School E)
>
> "Everybody takes a job, so the jobs are equally distributed. Everybody has a chance to be the so-called leader. Going to workshops and meetings: we all try to attend some, so that we are represented...At this point people say, I'll do this, I'll do that, so that everybody has a hand in what's going on..." (Lead Teacher, School C)

Teachers' beliefs about the collegial atmosphere in small schools also extend to their work with other teachers and members

of the staff. Specifically, data reflect teachers' reports of designing, sharing, and coordinating their instructional practices with one another. This was often demonstrated through the extreme efforts, above and beyond the school day and week, that teachers exerted in order to find time to meet and discuss students, plan integrated units, and arrange educational activities. For example, interview data revealed that in one school where the teachers were discussing their lesson plans for the upcoming weeks, they decided to address the same topic from their respective disciplines. Because of the relationship of the faculty members, the frequency with which they were able to formally and informally meet, and the desire to offer continuity to their students, these teachers were able to redesign their lesson plans to accommodate this collaboration. After the initial "happenstance" of this event, they brought the idea of including more collaborative work to the other teachers, school leaders, and ultimately, the students. These teachers attribute the success of this idea and the ability to make it happen to the fact that they work in a small school.

> "We transfer all that information to each other and then we go do it…How can I work with you? What do you need? Are you doing any papers? We meet and talk about kids." (Teacher, School C)

> "We often collaborate with one another and follow through with one another on our students that pass from one teacher to the next." (Teacher, School C)
>
> "We focus on looping, continuation, scaffolding - building on what we've done previously." (Staff Focus Group, School B)

Academic Press and Care

The literature has repeatedly shown that the proper balance between academic press and student care is a key component for student success (e.g., Lee et al., 2000; Bryk et al., forthcoming). Academic press can be reflected in teachers having high expectation for their students, assigning increasingly difficult tasks, providing additional instructional time, and/or requiring multiple methods of assessments. Student care is often reflected in having knowledge and concern for students beyond what is observable and able to be quantified in academic activity. While student learning is largely about challenging students with the appropriate curricula and instruction (Newmann and Welhage, 1995), students must also feel that they are known, valued and respected for their individual contribution to the school's community. Qualitative data revealed that the faculty of small schools not only sought to combine academic rigor with

personalized student attention, but often regarded academic press as a form of student care.

> "…it isn't just that caring leads to rigor, its caring in a skillful, organized way, that gets kids deeply involved in what they are doing." (External Partner, School A)
>
> "[An advantage of smallness is that it] allows you to get to know the child on an intimate level…you can tailor your strategies to specifically fit the needs of that child. So you're not forced to lump everybody into two groups or three groups…" (Staff Focus Group, School H)
>
> "Here everything is so much more personal, every kid hugs me every day, [one student believes], not that she needs to have a hug everyday just that she thinks I need to have a hug too, so everyday that's got to be part of the day." (Lead Teacher 1, School A)
>
> "Academic rigor is key - kids sweating in the classrooms, talking about important issues, doing well on tests. These tests are important – they'll be doing this all their lives. Get kids in college." (Lead Teacher 2, School C)

Concerns About The Small School As A Professional Workplace

The data revealed that teachers in small high schools had positive impressions about their professional experiences; nonetheless, there were some concerns that came from faculty members, school leaders, external partners, and our own observations.

Teacher Burnout. Most faculty members expressed that in order for the school to function as it had been envisioned, they had to work very long hours and take on multiple responsibilities. Teachers helped with administrative duties; looked after the mental, emotional, and physical welfare of their students; and regularly interacted with students, parents, and their colleagues in the evenings and on the weekends. And although most teachers chose this intense pace, it did not negate the fears that these teachers may eventually become overburdened by their professional activities.

Staff Fragility. In many small schools, teachers were invited to join the faculty based on their commitment to the school's mission, philosophy, or curricular focus. This type of faculty buy-in often makes replacing teachers somewhat difficult. During the course of this study we observed a noticeable amount of staff turnover. Some teachers were wooed away to work at other schools, some went on to start their own small schools, and some left the profession entirely.

Other concerns arose when teachers were called away, even temporarily, to address administrative duties such as arranging students' internships, establishing and/or maintaining community

ties, or identifying and/or participating in professional development activities. In small schools there are usually no "extra" faculty members to cover classes. Thus, any changes in the small (by design) faculty often resound throughout the school.

Participation in Consensus Decision Making. One external partner noted that many, if not most, teachers are familiar with working in top-down environments where principals and other administrators have the sole responsibility of making decisions for the school. This partner went on to say that small school faculties may not have developed and mastered the skills for group problem-solving and consensus making that are often a major part of decision making in small schools. And one teacher in another school mentioned that small schools were often like small towns, where everyone knew everyone else and no one wanted to offend anyone. Further, this teacher stated that in meetings if you did not voice your concerns, for fear of offending your colleagues, it was like giving passive consent although that may not have been the intention.

Concerns of school-within-school (SWS) teachers. Several of the teachers in the qualitative sample admitted that they often find it difficult to be an effective educator when they are required

to divide their time between their small school and host school. These tensions are especially salient when teachers are required to teach classes in both the small school and the host school, as well as when they are required to attend staff and departmental meetings in both settings.

In spite of these concerns, teachers in all types of small schools generally made positive remarks about the professional communities to which they belonged. While strong professional communities can be rewarding, subsequent steps in many schools involve determining how being a part of these communities affects the relationships that teachers have with their students. Research has shown that building relationships within a school community, and these types of relationships among the faculty in particular, are often precursors to student engagement, persistence, and academic achievement (Newmann and Welhage, 1995; Powell, 1996).

How Do Strong Professional Communities Affect Students In Small Schools?

These data consistently indicate that the professional communities in these schools were strong, and included several of the important components that have been found to enhance student

engagement and achievement. These communities were formed in some of the most academically struggling schools in the district, and yet, they were able to renew and revitalize their teaching practices. A summary of the system wide quantitative data[16] of a sub-sample of 55 small high schools reveals some of the changes that occurred in students' behaviors in schools where there were reports of strong professional communities.

The data reflect that students in small high schools had significantly higher attendance rates than students attending conventional schools[17]. Depending on the type of small school, the students in these high schools were attending school anywhere from three to five days more per semester than their peers in conventional schools. Further, between September, 1998 and September, 1999 they were dropping out of high school at significantly lower rates than their peers in conventional schools. While the dropout rate during this period was 10.3 percent in conventional schools, freestanding small schools and schools-within schools had dropout rates of 5.1 and 6.1 respectively. And although not significant, data revealed that students in schools-

[8] For a review of the quantitative data see Wasley et al. (2000).

[9] Conventional schools are those which do not adhere to the definition in the resolution or do not host small schools.

within-schools failed fewer courses and had higher grade point averages than their peers in the host school. In regard to student performance on standardized tests, the data revealed that the high school students in freestanding schools and schools-within-schools had reading scores that were similar to their peers in conventional schools. However in math, students in freestanding schools were slightly behind the system while students in schools-within-schools were similar to the system. And on both, standardized math and reading scores, the students in schools within-schools exceeded their peers in the host school.

In addition to these findings, the ethnographic data supplemented some of the experiences of students in small high schools that were not able to be quantified. Our research suggests that in addition to what is explicitly taught in the classrooms, small school students are also learning important lessons about life. This type of learning is often inherent to small schools due to the relationships that are formed, and the accountability and responsibility of every member of the school community. Observations reveal that in some of the strongest small schools, these types of lessons arise by virtue of the consciously created and developed ethos of the schools. For instance, in the following

observation we see that small numbers make expressions of violence, which may be commonplace in adjoining settings, something to be acknowledged, interrupted, and addressed.

> In a visit to one school-within-school (SWS), a member of the research team navigates the halls of a large high school. As he walks up to the fourth floor where the SWS is located, he witnesses a brawl among several teenage boys in the hallway. Amidst the shoving of the spectators and the fighting of boys, he realizes that he would not be able to restore order by himself. As he turns to get help, he realizes that the crowd is disbanding, and as he calls it, an "eruption of anonymity" occurs in the hallway. Within moments there is little or no evidence of what has just transpired.

This scene is contrasted with an occurrence in the same school building, but with students from the school-within school.

> A member of the research team witnessed a distracted student bolting out of a classroom and engaging in a fight with another student. Immediately, the teacher went to break up the fight. Soon afterwards, two larger senior boys who attended the small school came over, broke up the fight, and requested and received permission to talk to the student who was involved in the fight. After apologizing profusely to the researcher, the teacher explained that she was sure that without the senior students' help she would not have been able to manage the altercation.

This school-within-school is located in a large, four-story building that houses more than 1000 students. The small school has six teachers and less than 200 students. Many of the students in

this school have chosen to participate because of the particular vocational focus of the school. Teachers work hard to design a curriculum that incorporates the requirements of the central office and the critical components of the vocational program. Interviews and observations revealed the commitment that teachers and students have to this small school. Students who admitted that they had a reputation for fighting in the larger school, stated that they would "never" fight in the small school. The students reported responding this way because: the teachers who care for them would be disappointed, they know and have relationships with the other small school students, and it just wouldn't be "cool." These students seem to understand that if they are to concentrate on being better students and better prepared for work opportunities, that they can not offend the people or destroy the community that is making it possible for them.

A few of the reasons why small schools may be considered more safe and orderly environments is because there are fewer students to monitor, problems can be more easily identified and quickly addressed, and because in a small school community students are not only known by the faculty, but they are also known by their peers. This lack of anonymity may stifle the desire

to engage in mischievous or illicit behavior. Further, in many small schools components such as conflict resolution and peer counseling are built into the community to address issues of safety and order. As the essential supports and contextual resource model suggests, in schools where there is safety and order, faculty and students can concentrate on the business of teaching and learning.

In observations of small high schools, data revealed that students were not only at the center of the educational enterprise, but they participated in co-constructing their learning experiences within the classroom, school and community. Students helped to choose and design the format of their advisory classes, they helped to identify a school to partner with in a community project, and they brought their communities and experiences into the classroom where teachers helped to put the students' realities into a broader context. In addition to becoming better citizens, students were coming to school more and becoming more successful in their academic achievement. When students struggled or failed, they recognized that, given the opportunity, their peers and teachers would support them. Some students were overwhelmed by the closeness, scrutiny, and the high demands of small schools — some even retreated. However, the majority of students in these

schools seemed to appreciate the attention that the adults in their schools gave them. And more importantly, they seemed to revel in the faith that the adults had in their future regardless of the students' race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

Conclusion

As we think about the education of public school students, especially those who are academically disadvantaged, it is important to consider the responsibility of adults in establishing and sustaining productive teaching and learning environments. Faculty members in small schools across the nation are leading these efforts by rethinking the role that they play in the education process. By participating in strong professional communities, these practitioners have the support to create engaging and challenging learning experiences for students, who under other circumstances, may have been ignored, poorly educated, or left behind. These educators are not relying on the student deficit model to excuse poor teaching and learning, but they are looking to themselves and their colleagues to make the process better.

These data reveal that teachers tapped into the strength of their professional community and pooled their resources to

transform the educational experience for students. Teachers took an otherwise fragmented, ever-changing, often impersonal experience, and created a more cohesive, stable, and personable learning environment. Because of the smaller student enrollments, teachers were able to know students, not just by name, but by ability and potential. Extraordinary efforts were exerted so that these teachers were teaching students, and not just subjects. Faculty members were able to discuss students across classes and grades, and monitor individual student progress. School leaders and teachers attributed this type of knowledge about, and care for, the students to the fact that the teachers worked together closely, with one another and the students over two and three years time periods.

Small schools require big commitments, and the members of these school communities seem willing to make the investment. Given the appropriate time, support, and resources, small schools seem to be a useful strategy to strengthen public schools, and quite possibly, school districts. And so let the words of one high school principal remain with you as you think about small schools, "I think a lot of kids need a purpose just to go to school, a purpose to

want to be there every day, and graduate. I think small schools give a lot of kids that purpose."

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